

Ohio State University Commencement

Sunday, August 29, 2010

11:30 AM-4:30 PM

The Shottenstien Center

Thank you.

I've had no greater honor in my lifetime than the one to address The Ohio State University class of 2010.

This is the first time I've addressed an entire graduating class here at The Ohio State University.

But, Coach Tressel invited me to address his football team last season before two of the most important games of the year, the Michigan game and then again before the Rose Bowl... We won them both.

So I'm 2 and 0... If each of you goes on to succeed from here, I'll be 3 and 0.

Like the great City of Columbus, I love this great university... so much that if you were to puncture my skin today I would bleed scarlet and gray.

I thought about what nuggets of wisdom I might share with you today... So my mind went back to my graduation from law school, graduation from undergraduate school and graduation from high school.

To tell you the truth, I cannot remember who spoke. I cannot remember what they said, and I cannot unearth any nuggets of wisdom I could pass on today.

I do remember on that glorious day in 1977, I was exhausted and blurry-eyed from the celebration of the days before... I remember standing there in the Cincinnati Stadium, in this black robe, in the hot summer sun, sweating profusely, thinking: "End this thing!"

I remember saying to myself with great pride, "I've achieved, I've conquered, and I've made it!"

As the ceremony proceeded, I had flashbacks of long nights in the library, hours upon hours of study, the friendships and relationships I made through those past four years.

Then they called my name and complete fear descended upon me.

Did the envelope they gave me contain within it a diploma—or did it contain a letter from the dean saying I was just two credits short, like the guys sitting next to me?

Did I really pass that final credit-grabbing senior course, "the art of volleyball," which made up for that "advanced chemistry" class I'd dropped at the last minute?

Did the university discover that I had absolutely no intention of paying for those campus parking tickets?

These are the questions I asked myself.

It was a diploma.

I looked at it, read every word on it, and I asked myself, "Now what? Now what?"

Later on that day, my grandmother, who attended the ceremony, answered that question, "Now what?" in her simple, homespun Southern Indiana sort of way.

She said, "You've come too far to stop now."

My grandmother was a hotel maid in Madison, Indiana. Her name was Cleo Coleman. Cleo, my grandfather Ben, and my father John, lived where all black folk lived in Madison at that time—at the bottom of the hill on a street called Broadway.

The city's main hotel was up on the hill on Broadway, then another, even steeper hill through the Downtown on the Main Street. I walked both hills many times as a young boy, and it was indeed challenging.

Every day, Cleo would walk up those two hills to change bed sheets and clean toilets in a hotel she herself could not stay in.

On those cold wintry mornings, halfway up those hills, when all she wanted was to duck into the heat of a storefront or on those hot, sultry summer days, when all she wanted was to rest on the bench and catch her breath, I could hear her say to herself,

"You've come too far to stop now."

So as you take this diploma bestowed upon you today, and you say to yourself, as I did with pride years ago, "I've achieved, I've conquered, and I've made it!" you may also ask yourself, "Now what? Now what?"

Realize that you are only halfway up that hill—and in the words of Cleo Coleman, "You've come too far to stop now."

You are opening a new chapter in your life.... That's why it's called "commencement," or the beginning.

You are ready because you have just received one of the finest educations you could ever receive in America.

The Ohio State University ranks 18th among more than 650 public universities nationally and the No. 1 public university in Ohio.

Just ask one of your fellow classmates who is graduating here today.

Roberta Hamper started school here in 1959. She left school to raise a family and then entered the workforce in a variety of jobs. Roberta came back to finish her degree, which she is receiving today more than five decades after she started.

That's perseverance. Let's have a hand for Roberta.

Like Roberta, I too understand the value of Ohio State.

OSU and the City of Columbus are joined at the hip. Each of us is dependent on the success of the other.

I know the economy's tough out there... jobs are scarce... but the City of Columbus is doing better creating jobs than any other city in Ohio... and most the cities in the Midwest.

U.S. News & World Report recently named Columbus one of the best places to find a job.... and is widely considered one of the best cities for young professionals to live and work.

So if you're worrying about where to move ... I've got good news for you... You don't have to move at all... Live and work right here in Columbus.

As you move on, follow your passion. Your passion will lead you to your place in the world.

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive—and do that.

Because what the world needs is people who come alive.

Follow your passion. But understand that your passion may change along the way.

I have shifted gears many times over the years, and as far back as when I was a young boy growing up in Toledo... my friends and I decided we were going to China.

We had passion and we had a plan.

We had the best plan ever created by mankind. We weren't going to hop a plane to China, we weren't going to sail the ocean blue to China—we were going to dig a hole in my backyard all the way to the other side of the world. So that's what we did.

We dug a hole in my backyard 15, 20 feet deep to China. It took us hour upon hour, shovel after mighty shovel—we were determined!

Then something happened we did not expect—something happened that was not part of the greatest plan ever created by mankind... we got tired! And decided maybe digging our way to the other side of the world might not be such a good idea after all.

But we didn't get discouraged. We made the most of our 20-foot hole to China.

We changed our passion and our plan, we opened up to new possibilities—our new plan was even better than the old one.

We rounded up the other kids in the neighborhood, and charged them each a nickel to climb down in the hole, get down in the dirt, press their ear against the ground, and listen to the people on the other side of the world.

I stood over the top of the hole, yelling down to my customers, "Can you hear them? Can you hear them?"

I made a lot of money that summer.

As you are conferred this great honor of graduation from the finest university in America—maybe years from now when you too may be asked to speak at a commencement ceremony, I want you to remember just three things:

First: You've come too far to stop now.
Second: You can't dig your way to China
And finally: **OH...**

Thank you.